

Theses of the PhD Dissertation

**Queering the Iron Curtain:
Spaces of Otherness
in British and Eastern European Cinema**

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1. Identifying the aims and the subject of the dissertation

The goal of this dissertation is to experiment with an academic, discursive, analytical space in which it becomes possible to talk about similarities and differences between Eastern and Western Europe's specific, localised cultural phenomena while remaining conscious of and try avoiding the trap of reinscribing inherited hierarchical structures, value judgments, fantasies and stereotypes about either context. The area chosen for that experiment is representations of queerness, because "queer is unaligned with any specific identity category" (Jagose 2); and therefore, establishes an intersection where the various intertwined threads of normative and value systems, traditions, internalisations, marginalisations and otherings become exposed, questioned – queered – and therefore they open up for analysis.

The word, "queer," itself is a junction of various meanings. As Annamarie Jagose explains in her *Queer Theory: An Introduction* queer used to be (and in homophobic discourse it still resurfaces as) a derogatory term for "homosexual," a synonym of "faggot." However, after being reclaimed by LGBTQ activism (lesbian, gay, transgender, trans, queer), queer "has come to be used differently, sometimes as an umbrella term for a coalition of culturally marginal sexual self-identifications" (1). Furthermore, during the "queer turn" in academia during the 1990s, queer acquired a theoretical meaning as well, being "a nascent theoretical model which has developed out of more traditional lesbian and gay studies" (1). Although the various meanings of queer might evoke connotations of uncertainty or still being figured out, Jagose also emphasises that "[i]t is not simply that queer has yet to solidify and take on a more consistent profile, but rather that its definitional indeterminacy, its elasticity, is one of its constituent characteristics" (1).

Queer cinema is just as elusive to proper and conclusive definitions as queer. Many scholars include films in histories of queer cinema that actually contain no explicit representations of queer characters, issues, spaces or practices, as early examples of queer "touches" on the dominance of heterosexual cinematic attitudes (see for instance Richard Dyer's *The Culture of Queers*, Robin Griffiths ed. *British Queer Cinema*, B. Ruby Rich *New Queer Cinema: The Director's Cut*, Alexander Doty's *Flaming Classics. Queering the Film Canon*). On the other end of the scale, we find the "hardcore," activist queer visual arts that are consciously and fiercely challenging, deconstructing and queering the hegemony of heterosexuality and cinema itself in their every aspect (see for instance B. Ruby Rich's *New Queer Cinema: The Director's Cut* on the democratizing and queering effect of the camcorder).

As my aim is to disentangle the socio-cultural, geopolitical, ideological attitudes, power structures, stereotypes and practices that align in cultural and sexual othering, it is a third area of queer cinema that forms the core of my corpus: contemporary queer-themed feature films, which represent queer issues, characters, spaces, (sexual) practices. It is important to note that these are all films that take the topic of queerness seriously: even if sometimes there are homophobic overtones in them, queerness has an impact on the story, the queer character(s) is/are active, driving forces of the film, and not simply comic reliefs. They are mainstream films in the sense that they not necessarily attempt (consciously) to queer, transgress or subvert cinematic traditions, yet they do queer the aspects of their socio-cultural contexts. Hence, they are most suitable for reading and queering the relations and identity politics between and within Great-Britain and Eastern Europe.

2. Outline of employed methods

Although I use various theoretical models and approaches in the individual chapters – such as psychological models of coming out, spatial theory, cultural geography, body studies, affect theory and sociology, which provide an analytical framework for my readings – the theoretical and methodological basis of my dissertation lies at the intersection of queer, postcolonial and postsocialist theories. In agreement with the majority of scholars working with these conditions of post-ness, – although bearing in mind temporal and historical factors – I approach these as cultural, spatial, sociological and discursive conditions, which necessitate and allow for reflection on seemingly established and naturalised structures of power, knowledge, discourse and identification.

Even if the parallel reading of postsocialist and postcolonial conditions is not unproblematic, the methodology of the dissertation takes Madina Tlostanova's approach to this intersection as a starting point: she calls for an understanding that for the eradication of binary systems it is not "just" the co-dependence and mutual construction of East and West that should be taken into consideration, but also that the two juxtaposed constructions – and also the thought systems surrounding them – stem from one common source, as they are both products of modernity ("Postcolonial" 30). The methodology of the dissertation aims to be what she calls decolonial thinking, which excavates and examines this shared root. I call for a "dialogic encounter" (Zabrowska et al 25) among East, West, postcolonial and postsocialist theory, the decolonial option, and queer also chips in as the one who "exemplifies a more mediated relation to categories of identification" (Jagose 77), to create a space to enquire about the possibilities of deconstructing the East-West binary.

Following Tlostanova's argument about decolonial thinking, instead of a strictly binary, comparative reading – which might reproduce the very binaries I aim to leave behind – my attitude towards reading British and Eastern European cinematic representations of queerness can be better described as *imparative*, which comes from the Latin “*imparare*”, meaning “to learn in the atmosphere of plurality” (“Postsocialist” 131). Consequently, the queer representations of the “Western ideal” – in this case represented by Great-Britain – are not treated as perfect models to which the Eastern European films are compared, rather, they are one (or many) strategy that can be read parallel to the Eastern European depictions of queerness without (re)building a hierarchy between their modes of representation. Through implementing an exploration being conscious about plurality, I hope to open up entangled threads of (neo-/post-)imperialism, (neo-/post-)colonialism, (post-)socialism, and the binary oppositions between the East and West of Europe for a truly intersectional reading.

By thinking and moving beside the iron curtain, its (past) existence and history is not forgotten, and it becomes possible to scrutinise the struggles, hierarchies, constructions, fantasies and myths without the burdening heritage of a Western dreamland and Eastern “nightmareland.” By thinking *imparatively*, beside the Iron Curtain, juxtaposing themes and representations of various oppositions regarding queerness in the selected films – closeted/out, fucking/making love, alienation/community, rural/urban, native/foreign –, does not inevitably turn into attaching moral/ethical/value judgements on the basis of where they were made, yet, local specificities do not have to end up in the closet either.

3. The results of the dissertation

The most important aim and result of the dissertation is joining the discussion about the deconstruction of the East-West binary within Europe and the value hierarchies attached to it, by formulating a triangular viewpoint through examining the representation of queerness in British and Eastern European cinema. I read the representations of queerness as an intersection of power relations, discursive knowledges and social dynamics that marginalize cultural and sexual others in the name of a centre or a norm. I pointed out similar patterns in how the different cinemas approach the issue of representing queerness, which indicate that the seemingly impassable border imagined along the iron curtain is the thinnest where it would be thought to be the strongest: in the field of attitudes, approaches and mentalities towards otherness. The British cinematic representations, if the fantasies that uphold the East-West binary were unquestionable, would have been able to serve as a model for an open, liberal and natural representation of queerness. However, they not only approach queerness through similar

issues as the Eastern European examples, they cannot provide more comforting and satisfying answers to the same questions either.

After an “Introductory Case Study” of Francis Lee’s *God’s Own Country*, which provides a close-reading of central issues of the film – like the process of coming out, sexual spaces and experiences, reclaiming a seemingly heteronormative space, and dealing with ethnic and sexual otherness – and highlights and problematises the concepts and issues that compose the main junctions in the forthcoming chapters; the first chapter focuses on the representation of the closet and coming out. I approached the concepts through both linear and continuous models of homosexual identity development (i.e. coming out). I connected both the closet and coming out as being in close connection with space and visibility, and therefore analysed the representational strategies of my corpus through their spatial metaphors for depicting the closet and their characters’ struggle with coming out. In contrast with the popular notion that imagines the West as a liberal and queer-accepting cultural space, and Eastern Europe as a backward, heteronormative and homophobic area, I pointed out a similar trajectory in the attitudes of cinematic representations. The early examples from the 1970s and 1980s are results of activist enthusiasm and attempt to fight against oppressive and censoring political and socio-cultural structures both in the United Kingdom and East-Germany, and interpret their main characters’ relationship to public, extraqueer coming out at their workplaces as an act of political resistance. From the 1990s, I examined three films by heterosexual directors which – in the changed political and cultural atmospheres of post-Thatcher Britain and post-regime change Hungary – took up the responsibility of educating the public about the naturalness of homosexuality, and with their pro-gay politics, display positive images of queer people. In the new millennia, filmmakers both in Britain and Eastern Europe turned towards unique individuals’ struggles with their closets and coming out.. Yet, a common thread between the five analysed films is their relentless concern with different structures of the closet, of homophobic environments and the individual battles against these.

In the second chapter I elaborated on the complex matrix of space, affect and sexual practice. Through reading various examples from both the British and Eastern European context, I pointed out that the films depict an active, multifarious interplay between affectivity, use – and production – of space and sexual practice. I argued that although certain spaces are affected by normative structures, and are expected to trigger certain affective reaction, and therefore predicted to allow for only particular sexual practices, the films depict a more fluid and changing – changeable – relationship between space, affect and sex in relation to self-

acceptance, mutuality of desire and pleasure, and consent. I point out that no sexual practice or space can be seen as unquestionably shameful or enjoyable, and it is the quality of the individual's affective reaction that shapes the affective quality of the practice and also of space. Affect, space and sexual practice constitute a circular matrix, in which space influences the practice, sexual conduct shapes the space, and both are impacted by affective states.

The third chapter discussed the effects of queer presence in non-metropolitan areas. The first subchapter concentrated on representations of the countryside in Eastern European films as a container of traditional notions of masculinity. I argued that the homophobia inherent to countryside communities as represented in these films is a result of the crisis of heteronormativity and straight masculinity, which is emphasised in the films through depictions of dysfunctional father figures and families. As a result, queerness is interpreted as an outside threat, and homophobia is applied as a compensatory strategy for the marginalised position of the straight countryside. In the second subchapter I pointed out that British representations of non-metropolitan areas also show signs of masculine crises as a result of the deindustrialisation carried out by Margaret Thatcher's government. I argued that these films choose queerness – the queering of traditional working-class masculine values – as a survival strategy for the obsolete, unemployed men. I also pointed out, however, that even if the films end on a positive note, queering working-class masculinities cannot be regarded as a success, since the main working-class male characters' goal and desire is to go back to the pre-queered, pre-deindustrialised, pre-unemployed state of business and masculinity.

In the fourth chapter I compared two British and two Eastern European films featuring interracial/interethnic relationships through the concepts of intersectionality, solidarity and trust. I have pointed out that the basic situations are similar in both the Eastern European and British examples: the characters are constructed and represented as occupying a multi-marginal, hybrid identity position, at the intersections of sexual, racial/ethnic, financial, cultural, spatial and class-related difference. I analysed how the films represent the development of these relationships, where recognising the other's multi-marginal position is depicted as key to a successful relationship. The British narratives show their couples embracing each other's multi-marginal positions, and therefore can go against the underlying logic of marginalising strategies in mainstream society. I also pointed out how these utopian, fairy-tale endings raised doubts in scholars and critics, and argued that the two British films depict narratives of successful interpersonal trust, which are often (mis)read as tales of social multicultural trust, even though the films indicate its lack by representing violent attacks on the queer spaces. In the Eastern

European films the recognition of the characters' being mutually affected by the same marginalising techniques is missing, which leads to – instead of solidarity – unilateral attempts of one character trying to help and save the other. As a result, hierarchy is maintained within the relationships, and solidarity, equality and, therefore, trust cannot be achieved. However, as opposed to British films, the Eastern European narratives – partly due to their genres as documentary and semi-autobiographical docu-drama – approach the issues of multi-marginal couples from another perspective: they acknowledge the lack of social trust, and depict its effects on the personal levels of trust through the multi-marginal couples.

In its structure the dissertation follows the spatial connotations of coming out – as a space gradually opening up – its conclusion is structured around representations of the Pride parade, which is often perceived as the ultimate celebration of queer visibility. The two analysed films emphasise that the key elements of queer success are awareness, reflection and recognition. Through the examination and reflection on cultural imaginations and stereotypes it becomes possible to recognise attitudes and mentalities that construct and put into discourse cultural ideologies, representations and identities. Socio-cultural, geopolitical, ideological attitudes, power structures and marginalising practices – be those cultural, sexual, ethnic, religious, or spatial othering processes – open up for disentanglement. Such awareness provides a ground for recognising otherness – both in the self and the other – without constructing hierarchies and making value judgements. In short, queering is intimately connected to learning in the atmosphere of plurality.

Filmography

	Eastern Europe	the United Kingdom
Chapter 1	<p><i>Coming Out</i> (1989, dir. Heiner Carow)</p> <p><i>Kisses and Scratches</i> (1995, dir. György Szomjas)</p> <p><i>The Innermost Room</i> (2006, dir. Csaba Szekeres)</p> <p><i>Panic</i> (2008, dir. Attila Till)</p> <p>and <i>Floating Skyscrapers</i> (2013, dir. Tomasz Wasilewski)</p>	<p><i>Nighthawks</i> (1978, dir. Ron Peck)</p> <p><i>Beautiful Thing</i> (1996, dir. Hettie MacDonald)</p> <p><i>Get Real</i> (1998, dir. Simon Shore)</p> <p><i>Weekend</i> (2011, dir. Andrew Haigh)</p> <p><i>The Pass</i> (2016, dir. Ben A. Williams)</p>
Chapter 2	<p><i>Coming Out</i> (1989, dir. Heiner Carow)</p> <p><i>Kisses and Scratches</i> (1995, dir. György Szomjas)</p> <p><i>Mandragora</i> (1997, dir. Wiktor Grodecki)</p> <p><i>This I Wish and Nothing More</i> (2000, dir. Kornél Mundruczó)</p> <p><i>Men in the Nude</i> (2006, dir. Károly Esztergályos)</p> <p><i>Chameleon</i> (2008, dir. Krisztina Goda)</p> <p><i>Floating Skyscrapers</i> (2013, dir. Tomasz Wasilewski)</p> <p><i>Land of Storms</i> (2014, dir. Ádám Császi)</p>	<p><i>Nighthawks</i> (1978, dir. Ron Peck)</p> <p><i>Young Soul Rebels</i> (1991, dir. Isaac Julien)</p> <p><i>Beautiful Thing</i> (1996, dir. Hattie Macdonald)</p> <p><i>Get Real</i> (1998, dir. Simon Shore)</p> <p><i>Endgame</i> (2001, dir. Gary Wicks)</p> <p><i>Greek Pete</i> (2009, dir. Andrew Haigh)</p> <p><i>Weekend</i> (2011, dir. Andrew Haigh)</p>
Chapter 3	<p><i>Go West</i> (2005, dir. Ahmed Imamović)</p> <p><i>Beyond the Hills</i> (2013, dir. Cristian Mungiu)</p> <p><i>In the Name of</i> (2013, dir. Małgorzata Szumowska)</p> <p><i>Land of Storms</i> (2015, dir. Ádám Császi)</p>	<p><i>The Full Monty</i> (1997, dir. Peter Cattaneo)</p> <p><i>Billy Elliot</i> (2000, dir. Stephen Daldry)</p> <p><i>Pride</i> (2014, dir. Matthew Warchus)</p>
Chapter 4	<p><i>A Village Romance</i> (2007, dir. Kriszta Bódis)</p> <p><i>Soldiers – Story From Ferentari</i> (2017, dir. Ivana Mladenović)</p>	<p><i>My Beautiful Laundrette</i> (1985, dir. Stephen Frears)</p> <p><i>Young Soul Rebels</i> (1991, dir. Isaac Julien)</p>
Conclusion	<p><i>The Parade</i> (2011, dir. Srđan Dragojević)</p>	<p><i>Pride</i> (2014, dir. Matthew Warchus)</p>